

Rasmussen, T. H. (2003b). The virtual world of toys - playing with toys in a Danish preschool. In: A., Nelson, L.-A., Berg & K., Svensson (Eds.): *Toys as Communication* (pp. 47-58). Stockholm: SITREC.

Denne publikation stammer fra www.livsverden.dk - hjemstedet for:

Forum for eksistentiel fænomenologi

Et tværdisciplinært netværk af praktikere og forskere, som anvender eksistentiel-fænomenologiske grundlagstanker og perspektiver i deres arbejde.

Husk at angive korrekt kildehenvisning ved referering til denne artikel. Den korrekte reference fremgår øverst på denne side.

Læs mere om Forum for eksistentiel fænomenologi
og download flere artikler på
www.livsverden.dk

English version:

This publication is downloaded from www.livsverden.dk – the home page of

The Society for existential phenomenology

A Danish cross disciplinary society of practitioners and researchers who make use of existential phenomenological theory and perspectives in their work.

For more information and downloadable articles visit
www.livsverden.dk

The virtual world of toys - playing with toys in a Danish preschool

Torben Hangaard Rasmussen

The research project "The virtual world of toys - playing with toys in a Danish preschool" is a phenomenological description of toys- from the perspective of the playing child. The aim of the research project is to describe and analyse the way children are playing with toys in a Danish preschool. The children are from 0-6 years.

When I look closer at the amount of toys passing through a child's hands during a day in the preschool in question, then toys obviously cover a wide field: it can be leaves put into a plastic bucket, and it can be a figure firing a pistol in a computer game at the screen. Both "nature" and modern high technology supply children with toys. In the research project I put forward the thesis, that a definition of toys has to be "broad": toys appear in a virtual world, where almost anything can be transformed into or combined with something else and create a world of ambivalence and unpredictability.

Toys are not something definite or determined. Toys rather have an ambiguous appearance. They can be manufactured toys and carry with them "offered meanings", but these meanings easily can be transformed into something else. An example:

One day a boy took a roller pin with two red handles, put green plasticine around it, so that only one red handle was visible. He took it up to his lips and laughing said to me: It is a feeding bottle.

It is not my intention to give a detailed description of the different kind of toys in the preschool. In fact, children have the possibility of playing with various forms of toys: natural toys as leaves, sticks, stones, sand, soil and manufactured toys as Lego, Play Mobile, Barbie dolls, Spider Man and computer games. The long "history of toys" is represented in the preschool, and children do not find it difficult at one moment to play

with mud and in the next to sit before the computer screen. Is it possible to point at a common denominator of these different worlds of toys? I would mean so.

A metaphoric way of perceiving the world

When children play, that the small goals of aluminium are a prison or an animal cage, when they transform the plastic bucket and the hockey stick into helmet and gun, when they play that leaves are glows in a fire and when they transform a silver-grey knight figure into fish bait, a virtual world is appearing: it is a world with many doors to open. Opening these doors the child learns to conjure up possible worlds with unknown forms. Children experience, that toys are full of possibilities.

At a very early age children are experiencing the world in a "metaphoric" way. They have a keen eye for new and possible forms. Aristotle is generally believed to be the one, who in his *Rhetoric* (Aristotle, 1952a) and *Poetics* (Aristotle, 1952b) coined this term. The original sense of metaphor is *meta* ("beyond") and *pherein* (to "carry"). In Aristotle's words: "to know how to invent fine metaphors means to know how to grasp the resemblances that objects bear to one another" (Poetics 1952a), and "in philosophy, too, the ability to perceive similarities between objects which are far apart is evidence of an acute mind" (Rhetoric III. II 1414a 9). Children regularly "create" metaphors in order to express a resemblance between objects.

If a boy at 5 or 6 years sees a piece of wood looking like a power saw, he immediately feels a kind of whirring in his fingers. Imagination is not coming from inside, but is created in a field, where his fingertips communicate with a piece of wood, which suddenly turns into a power saw. His body is no longer where it is as a physical substance, but already on its way into a world of power sawing. It is a virtual body, ready to transform itself. It is amazing to see, how children often look at the world as if forms are something just waiting to be transformed into new forms. What can that object turn into? What can I myself be transformed into? I remember a little episode from my own private life:

My family had been on a holiday in Greece and we were on a plane

from Athens to Copenhagen. My daughter asked me if she could get my small towlette enveloped in blue folio. Why, I asked. You already have one. I will use it as a pillow, when I play with my small dolls at home, she answered.

What does it mean, that toys exist in a virtual field and can all objects in a broad sense be or become toys, if only they are played with? These are some of the questions I will discuss while referring to small play episodes from the Danish preschool.

Toys as virtual phenomena

Phenomenologically, toys do not exist as objects separated from a playing subject. Children are "always already" situated in a meaningful world of toys, which are related to a playing body. Toys cannot only be defined by being copies, imitations or reflections of something in the adult's world. Toys become toys by virtue of the fact that they are played with in a virtual world of transformation. Toys must have a form of dynamic existence different from that of tools. A thesis, which will be further developed, sounds like this: Working with tools is a "realisation of the possible". Playing with toys is "a virtualization of the real".

It means, that toys do not necessarily have definite forms, and they need not be manufactured products. Virtually almost everything surrounding the child can be transformed into something else or connected with other kinds of toys and thereby create unpredictable play processes. Toys virtualize the world by constantly creating new forms.

Piaget is one of few play researchers, who has developed a theory of toys. In his work *La formation du symbole chez l'enfant* he characterizes children's play with objects (toys) as "assimilation deformante" (Piaget, 1945, p. 108). When children are playing with toys they are also playing with forms. What happens for instance, when a plastic shovel becomes a pistol? We know that the plastic shovel has a definite form and that the child usually digs with it in the sand or use it to fill a bucket with sand, which can be cakes, etc. But the shovel also has a potential gestalt, a form, which is virtual - a pistol e.g. Contrary to the plastic bucket the shovel has the possibility of becoming a pistol. On the other hand the

bucket has the possibility of becoming - a helmet e.g. In both cases definite forms or gestalts are "deformed" and transformed into something else, when they are played with. At lunch I have observed that children in the preschool often are playing with forms:

The lunch box becomes a television. Banana skins laid in certain patterns become either a tent or an octopus. A piece of orange peel becomes a canoe. The cup becomes a telephone, the plate a steering wheel.

The Dutch play researcher and philosopher Buytendijk describes toys in the same way (Buytendijk, 1933). Objects are played with, he states, because they have a "pathic" or ambiguous appearance. The child is attracted by a world with fluid and sensuous forms and attached to them in an ambiguous way. Objects are not just what they are. They appear as "images" (Buytendijk's expression) with inherent possibilities. In fact, children only play with objects that appear as images. To appear as an image means, that the object "has" a dynamic, virtual gestalt and therefore every object seems to be more than it is. We only play with objects, which have a pathic appearance. Consequently objects must be perceived in a distinct way in order to be played with and felt as toys. An example:

It is winter in the preschool. Three boys at 5 have found a large piece of ice. The underside, which has a pulpy surface, is turning upside. One of the boys tells me, that it is their ice layer cake.

In order to be played with as a toy, an object (a piece of ice) must express something and in a way invite the child to ask these questions: how can I play with it? And how can it play with me? The preschool teachers, who are surrounded by a lot of "potential" toys, do not have this steady bodily feeling of "I must play with toys" and feel them in my hands, because they do not appear as images, as having possibilities. They do not have this immediate and expressive quality, which we know attract children. Toys are played with in an ambiguous field, where they need not be treated in a definite way.

The more known an object is, the more likely it is that it will lose its play value. Children neither play with the known nor the unknown. Certain objects are more suitable for play than others: the ball is the perfect toy, an archetypical symbol of play deeply rooted in the human body: you both move and are being moved by the ball. Toys are dialectical phenomena, which I control and which I do not control. Children both want to move and touch toys, but at the same time they also want to be moved and touched by them.

Buytendijk's phenomenological description circles about simple play objects, which you also find in the preschool: branches, water, sand, snow, sticks etc. They are objects especially played with when outside at the playground. Rightly you can ask this question: Does Buytendijk's phenomenological description still hold, if we take a closer look at how children are playing with modern toys as Lego and Play Mobile? I would mean so. Children only are attracted by these kinds of toys, because they have a pathic appearance. Toys must have inherent possibilities in order to fit into the sphere of play.

As already mentioned Piaget has an open eye for what is characteristic of playing with a toy, but he does not fully understand the logic of the process, because play as a phenomenon is explained in a rationalistic way, with a classic distinction between subject and object, where the criterion of objectivity and truth is decisive. According to Piaget play is untrue in the sense, that it does not depict reality in an objective manner, but transforms or "deforms" it in its own way. To my mind, Piaget's conclusions are false. He does not recognize, that playing with toys is creating a virtual world of its own. It is not a matter of whether toys depict or represent reality in a proper manner.

We can take an example from his classic work *La formation du symbole chez l'enfant*, and which I have also observed several times in the preschool. Piaget describes how a child is able to "use" a spoon in quite different ways: 1) As something to eat with (a kitchen tool). 2) As a tool to get hold of something lying under the sofa (the spoon is a sort of prolongation of the hand) and finally: 3) As a human being walking along the street (the spoon is deformed and transformed into a toy). The "deformation" of the spoon can be interpreted as a virtualization of the known. It is not a deviation from an objective reality, but a creation of something new.

Why are especially children and not preschool teachers inclined to transform a spoon into a walking man, a cup into a telephone, a plate into a steering wheel? The reason is, that children compared to adults, have a keen eye for possibilities. Principally everything is a "metaphore" of something else. Children live in a subjunctive world. Playing with toys is generating metaphors, creating a virtual and subjunctive space and during the play process the child is constantly moving from the real to the possible. Consequently toys do not primarily represent or imitate a world outside the play process, but create new worlds. Toys do not create specific possibilities; their essence rather is to create possibilities leading in many directions. Another example from the preschool:

We are outside at the playground. A boy (A) at 5 is passing by with a stick in his hand. We are going to Australia, he says. When are you to leave, I ask. We are just playing, he answers. How did you get there, I ask. We went by carriage, he answers. His play mate (B) of the same age picks some leaves from a tree and puts them into a bucket. They are food for the horses, he says. They sit down at a board. This is our carriage, they tell each other and A uses a stick as a whip. Gee up! Where are your horses, I ask. There, B answers, pointing out into the empty air. After a while B places the bucket with leaves outside the carriage in a bush. A, however takes the bucket and puts it back into the carriage. Don't do that, A says. Why, B objects. It was our refrigerator. No, A says and empties the bucket. The horses have eaten. It was my helmet.

The example, just one out of many, shows, that it is necessary to enlarge the notion of toys. Children can play with almost everything and transform it into toys. Not only manufactured toys bought in a store are toys. Virtually everything played with are toys. Did children not look at the world with "virtual glasses" they would neither create toys themselves by transforming objects into something else nor play with manufactured toys.

What is the difference between manufactured toys and objects transformed into toys? We have seen, that a lunch box can be transformed into a TV, but the Lego television belonging to the Scala doll's house is already a toy. Does the latter also have inherent

possibilities? It certainly must have, for else the girl would not play with it and combine it with other toys. Whether the child itself "creates" the toy or finds it in a "ready-made" form, in both cases they have inherent possibilities and appear as images.

By virtue of their bodily existence children are living in a world of possibilities. They have to live in this world of creation, because their own future is ahead of them. Children have to experiment with the world. Ontologically children are living in this world of possibilities, but it cannot be described as an "unreal" world. If the inherent possibilities of toys were not real to the child, it would not believe in and play with them.

We might also describe toys by means of the greek word "metamorphosis" (transformation). Toys are not definite forms, but forms waiting to be transformed into new forms. A bucket e.g. is a bucket, but virtually it is also A, B, C... It can become that and that... and can be combined with that piece of toys and that piece of toys. Look down into a box with Lego or Play Mobile and into a box with hammer, screwdriver. The latter forms are what they are within a definite context of tools, while the former ones are metaphors. By virtue of the playing dynamic they have the possibility of being transformed into new forms or combined with other toy forms in an unpredictable manner.

The virtual, however is not only characterized by metamorphosis or transformation. Toys also have expressive qualities. In their own expressive way they attract children. It is a way of perceiving the world, where there is no clear division between the inner and the outer, between subject and object. The virtual world of toys cannot be described by means of dualistic terms as the inner and the outer, subject and object, real and unreal. The virtuality of toys is preceding these distinctions.

Often I wonder why children look at the world through "virtual glasses". I look at the world as it apparently is. To the child the world can be a potential playground and a potential toy. The child is always looking around for possible toy forms:

A girl at 3 is sitting at a table playing with plasticine. The other children are making long sausages and small balls. The girl is talking with me. Suddenly she takes some of the plasticine and the rolling pin and makes a pancake out of it. By chance she leans forward and the

zip in her blouse makes an imprint in the plasticine. Look, she says, pointing at the imprint. Rails! And the pattern looks like rails. Another girl beside her is playing with small pearls. She has put them on a plastic sheet. It's a window, she tells me. I just saw a geometrical pattern. She saw a meaningful form.

The virtual: a grey zone

Philosophically the concept "virtual", which is a key notion in my paper, traditionally is described as a grey zone between the real and the possible, between the potential and the real. It is a field, where probability and unpredictability (surprise and adventure) are reigning. Toys as virtual phenomena exist in a world, where chance plays a prominent part. In an article "Im Trüben fischen" (Flusser, 1996) the philosopher Flusser writes, that everybody is employing the notion "virtual" without actually knowing the original etymological meaning of the word. Normally virtual is translated with "not fully real", but then you miss the dynamic aspect of the word.

Flusser examines the etymological meaning of the notion "virtual". It comes from latin (vis) and means power, especially male power. Virtual originally means something ejaculated with power and strength. By virtue of rain the tree outside my window has grown from the seed. That is, the rain is a prerequisite of the tree. If we transfer this dynamic interpretation of virtual to the world of toys and play, toys become toys by virtue of - what? By play! The play process "creates" a virtual world of toys.

I have stressed several times, that there are many different forms of toys in the preschool. You find sand, threes, dolls, cars, Lego, Playmobile, Spiderman, computer games with a huge number of strange figures. They are all toys belonging to a virtual world. The word virtual signalizes something ambiguous. It is a fluid world, where you find no clear differentiation between the real and unreal, the subjective and objective.

What is a knight figure? It belongs to a toy castle, where children also find other knight figures. Because of its definite form the knight has an "offered meaning". Mostly children are playing with these knight figures

as knight figures. But by virtue of its form and colour the knight figure has the possibility of being transformed into something quite different. The knight has a grey coat of mail and a grey sword. One day I observed something unusual:

The children are playing fish. One of them is an angler and holds the knight figure in his hand. He gives it to the fish. It is bait.

In other words: Toys are virtual forms, because 1) they express something, attract the playing child - be it a simple stick or stone, a ball, a doll, a plastic gun, a Spiderman figure, a hero in a computer game, 2) they have the possibility of being transformed into something else. A spoon can become a walking man, a plate a steering wheel and 3) they are virtually and meaningfully connected with other forms of toys and create unpredictable play processes. This implies, that the limits of the virtual are wide. The logic of the virtual is non-linear. If virtuality is a common feature of toys, then children themselves are important "toy designers". Why? Because the play process itself is a virtual force:

One day a boy gave me a white paper, he had cut through. Do you want an ice? The paper was shaped like an ice.

It is not the whiteness of the paper that makes it an ice, but the way it has been cut through. The boy was looking for a form, which had the possibility of being transformed into an ice. In that sense the boy is a toy designer.

Aristotle and the world of toys

The discussion of whether the world of toys is real or unreal has a long tradition in western philosophy. Especially Aristotle is the father of key western philosophical notions as reality, unreality, substance, form, possibility and virtuality. The latter is the scholastic or Latin translation of the Greek word *dynamis*. It means possibility. If we examine some of Aristotle's philosophical concepts, it might help us understanding what toys are. These considerations will also be a conclusion of this paper.

Form and substance are key notions in Aristotle's philosophy. Originally the notion of form comes from Plato, who considers the forms or ideas to be eternal and unchanging. According to Plato forms are real, while all the things in the human world only have a share in the forms. Aristotle criticises Plato's theory, because it cannot explain, how something changes. Aristotle introduces the notions of substance and form in order to explain what it means, that something changes into something else. His favourite example is a bronze ball. The bronze in itself is the substance, of which the ball is made, while the shape of the ball is its form.

Form, however has several meanings by Aristotle. It is the visible form, the way it looks, but form is also its function or inherent purpose (telos). From this point of view the form or purpose of the bronze ball is to be thrown by the athlete. According to Aristotle the substance has the possibility of becoming something. By means of different kind of tools the tree e.g. can be felt and become a house, a door, a chair. The tree carries a lot of possible forms, which only can be realized by a process of change.

As already mentioned, dynamis in classical Greek means possibility. The scholastics translated it with "potentialis" or "virtualis", which both means force, ability and possibility. Do these classical philosophical notions from Aristotle have any relevance, if we are to understand what happens, when children are playing with toys? How are we to describe this particular dynamic movement? What happens when the already mentioned spoon becomes a walking man? The spoon is made of metal, a substance and it has a definite form, it has been designed and constructed in such a way, that you can eat with it. But what happens, when the spoon is transformed into a walking man? Is it a real change? Has it changed its form in the Aristotelian sense? If we follow Aristotle's reasoning, the answer would be no. Only by eating with the spoon, the inherent possibility, the form of the spoon is realized.

Playing with toys is quite another dynamic movement: it is not a matter of change ("realizing the possible"), but rather of transformation ("virtualizing the real"). By virtue of its form, the spoon carries the possibility of becoming a walking man. By virtue of its ambivalent form the knight figure can be both a knight figure and bait and last but not least create unpredictable play processes: the central point, when playing

with toys is the infinite creation of possibilities. A virtualization of the world is taking place. I will end my paper with a little play episode from the Danish preschool:

Two boys at 4 and 5 are sitting at a table constructing with small plastic sheets, which can be put together. The sheets are spread around the table. The boys have constructed something they call boxing gloves. They put them on their hands, and they look like boxing gloves. "We are working", one of them tells me. "I thought, you were playing". "We are not playing", he answers. "We are constructing. "The boy at 5 removes a sheet from the top of the construction, so that you can look through it. He puts it up to his eye and smiles: "It's a telescope". In the next moment he tells me, that it is a rocket. Suddenly the boy at 4 stands up and makes flying movements with the construction. "No, we are not flying yet", "the 5 years-old tells him. "We are not ready". He keeps on constructing, until he is satisfied. "Now we can fly". All the time the 4 years-old imitates the 5 years-old.

References

- Aristotle: (1952a). *Rhetoric*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Aristotle: (1952b). *Poetics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Buytendijk, F. J.J. (1933). *Wesen und Sinn des Spiels*. Berlin: Kurt Wolf Verlag.
- Flusser, V. (1996). Im Trüben fischen. Article in *Von virtueller Realität*. Der Flusser-Reader. Mannheim: Bollmann.
- Piaget, J. (1945). *La formation du symbole chez l'enfant*. Bern: Delachaux Niestle.